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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: ENDING MEMBERSHIP IN CIS

REF: MOSCOW 2106

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On August 18, 2009, Georgia's membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) organization officially expired, following the one year mandatory wait period after officially informing the organization of its intentions on August 14, 2008 in the aftermath of the war with Russia. While the ending of its membership received significant attention in the local press, up to 75 agreements concluded while Georgia's membership in the CIS remain in force, including those related to trade issues, visa regimes and legal matters. In public statements, Georgian government officials struck a defiant tone, citing President Saakashvili's 2008 statement that Georgia was leaving the CIS "never to return." Deputy Foreign Minister David Jalangia added, however, that although Georgia was under occupation, the government was ready to continue "good neighborly and mutually beneficial cooperation" with all CIS states. Deputy Foreign Minister Nalbandov said in response to Russian comments about the negative impact on Georgian citizenry that it was Russian propaganda and placed the blame for the split firmly on Russia. END SUMMARY.

ENDING CIS MEMBERSHIP

12. (SBU) On August 18, 2009, Georgia officially completed the process of withdrawing its membership from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) after completing the one-year mandatory waiting period. In the aftermath of the August 2008 war with Russia, Georgia had informed the CIS of its intentions, citing the aggression of fellow member and northern neighbor Russia as its reason. The Georgian Foreign Ministry released a statement acknowledging the reasons for its departure from CIS as "Russian Occupation," "ethnic cleansing," and "recognition of the 'independence' of proxy regimes on Georgian territory." In response to a Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement noting the likely negative impact the withdrawal will have on ordinary Georgian citizens, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexander Nalbandov publicly cast the statement as simply "propaganda" and noted that he could not imagine how the situation could be worse between the two countries already. President Saakashvili's comments from 2008 were recalled in the press, although he personally did not make any statements acknowledging the exit from the post-Soviet group. Minister of Reintegration Yakobashvili stated that withdrawal was a "strategic geopolitical choice" and may help accelerate Georgia's accession to NATO and the EU.

FEW REAL CHANGES EXPECTED

13. (C) While the exit of Georgia from the CIS received wide media attention in Tbilisi, the Georgian Foreign Ministry made repeated comments that over 70 documents and agreements signed by Georgia while a member of CIS would remain in force, and that the government stands ready to continue good neighborly relations with all CIS states. MFA Head of the

Americas Division Levan Nizharadze told post that foreign trade and visa regime agreements would remain in force in spite of the withdrawal, and that the legal department of MFA was working diligently to ensure that impact on relations with any CIS members were minimal. Georgian media also cited many comments in Russian press from political experts expressing the view that this was a path on which Georgia began to move once Saakashvili took power in 2003, and that little to nothing would change.

GEORGIAN EXPERTS EXPRESS MIXED VIEWS

¶4. (SBU) Opinion outside of the Georgian government ranged from disappointment and concern to apathy and excitement. Zurab Khonelidze, the last Georgian representative to the CIS, noted his worry that Georgia's departure freed Russia from many organizational obligations related to territorial integrity, and opined that continued membership could have been exploited for Georgia's benefit in the future. Petre Chkheidze, a Georgian international relations expert, commented that withdrawal could damage Georgia's political, economic and cultural ties to the other CIS member states. Georgian political analyst Ramaz Sakvarelidze took the other side, stating that Georgia lost nothing by leaving CIS and the lack of any major military agreements in CIS made departure even easier. UNM MP Giorgi Kandelaki struck a common tone which downplayed the future success of CIS, stressing that since Georgia's announcement in 2008, two summits were held which were not attended by all the members. Georgian political analyst Tornike Sharashenidze called the possibility of staying in CIS "unthinkable" with a leading member not respecting another's territorial integrity. While

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usually somewhat critical of the Saakashvili government, he stated that the manner of Georgia's departure was "timely and correct."

¶5. (C) COMMENT: Georgia's departure from CIS marks the end of one of Tbilisi's last legal connections to the former Soviet Union as it continues its path towards the west and integration into European structures such as NATO and the EU. While typically defiant, official comment was also notable for its emphasis on the small number of changes to existing structures and agreements with other CIS members; even relatively benign comments about Georgian interest in "neighborly" relations with other CIS members, including Russia, made the exit less divisive than it could have been had some of the rhetoric from August 2008 been used again in August 2009. Ultimately, Georgia's efforts to further integrate into the west and any accompanying results in the future will provide the best assessment as to the eventual impact Georgia's departure from CIS will have on its citizens.

TEFFT